



CCN Elections & Democracy Initiative

Case study: How University of Maryland journalism students cover every school board election in the state

As we work with you to cover the election with your students, we want to highlight some successes in already-existing student-led election coverage.

One notable example is the University of Maryland's Local News Network, which in the fall of 2022 created a voter guide via a survey it sent to all school board candidates in the state. A whopping 105 of the 155 school board candidates surveyed responded, according to the director of UMD's Local News Network, Jerry Zremski. His program is repeating the survey project for this election, in which he expects even more responses because of its initial success.

Zremski has provided the 2024 voter guide survey [here for reference](#). CCN has created a voter guide template based on Zremski's, [which can be found here](#) for any student-led election coverage of local races.

So how was this idea born? When starting his role at UMD, Zremski spoke to newspaper editors around Maryland. He realized there was a need to cover local contentious school board races, and newsrooms lacked the staff to do it themselves. Zremski first proposed to his college dean, Rafael Lorente, that the Local News Network assist these newspapers in some races. Lorente, in response, suggested a school board voter guide for the entire state.

"It seemed daunting at first, but it actually was a lot easier than I thought," Zremski said.

He recommended that any school creating a student-led voter guide make sure each student has a reasonable number of candidates to cover, and not to overwhelm them. Zremski had about 100 students in his class, about 50 fewer than they had candidates. So he assigned each student at least one candidate and invited volunteers to opt for a second candidate for extra credit.

Before assigning students this project, Zremski already sent out a survey to all candidates, whose emails he was able to acquire from the Maryland Board of Elections. At first, he said,

they received only about 20 responses. But students were specifically assigned to “pester” the candidates via phone call once a week, which increased responses. To ensure his students called their assigned candidates, Zremski made them do so during class.

“Every week, they'd hear from this student, and eventually they get annoyed enough to fill out the thing,” he said. “Most of them who did it realized it was to their benefit to have done it.”

Zremski said the only editing they did for the candidates’ responses was copy-editing for grammar and AP Style.

Students were also assigned to find the candidate’s full name and review the online Maryland judiciary case search system for any court records.

“That proved to be a very, very fruitful endeavor,” Zremski said.

They found a dozen of the candidates had [tax liens](#) against them at some point in recent years. One candidate running on “family values,” students uncovered from these records, [had stolen her mother's ID](#) as well as items from Target.

Students faced obstacles when trying to vet candidates’ educational and employment backgrounds. In many cases, they ran into either a “complete brick wall” or were directed to contact a contracted HR company that deals with such inquiries costing as much as \$90 a pop, Zremski said. Because of how cumbersome those obstacles became to navigate among his scores of students, Zremski this year is limiting vetting only to court records. He acknowledged that vetting abilities will depend on the state’s public records laws and resources available.

The Local News Network designed a website where visitors could click on their county and see all their candidates’ responses. The site got more than 90,000 hits. News outlets across the state also published pieces of the voter guide for their coverage area.

Students then wrote issue-based stories based on the responses in the voter guide, including stories on school safety, pandemic-related learning loss, and book banning. Zremski included open-ended questions in the candidate survey specific to these issues and reported the stories based on their responses.

For schools interested in creating such a voter guide, Zremski recommends sending out a survey like his as soon as possible. He recommends being clear that candidates have a “soft

deadline” before students start calling them if they haven’t filled it out yet. He also recommends keeping track of which student is assigned to which candidate via an Excel or Google sheet.

He also recommends faculty “tailor the expectations” of a voter guide to the size and power of the student body, and create a plan to cover races that newspapers are not already covering on their own.

“It doesn't have to be as overwhelming and comprehensive as what we did,” he said. “You could take 20 students and do 20 candidates for the city council if you wanted to. You have to see where the need is.”

Finally, when it comes to students who may be nervous about making phone calls, a little touch of encouragement can go a long way. Zremski said he’s seen success in relieving their social anxiety once encouraging them to go to counseling. One even ended up thriving in a professional journalism career, he said.

For questions, contact CCN Elections & Democracy Program Manager Sarah Gamard at scbgamard@gmail.com.